

Testimony and the Scope of the Apriori

Peter J. Graham

University of California, Riverside

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I know $5+7=12$ apriori, and I know my car could use a trip to the car wash empirically. Our knowledge of simple mathematical truths through conceptual understanding is apriori and our knowledge of physical objects through sense perception is empirical. What about our knowledge of the content and force of speech acts through linguistic understanding? In particular, what about our knowledge of assertions? When Luca tells me that birds evolved from dinosaurs, is my knowledge that someone asserted birds evolved from dinosaurs apriori or empirical? What if I not only understand but also accept his assertion? What if I learn—come to know—from believing Luca’s testimony? Is my knowledge through testimony that birds evolved from dinosaurs apriori or empirical? I think we would all agree that my knowledge *about* Luca’s testimony is empirical, and my knowledge *through* Luca’s testimony must therefore be empirical as well. Aren’t both claims completely obvious?

In 1993, Tyler Burge challenged these conclusions.¹ In ‘Content Preservation’ he argued for three surprising theses, where the second and third depend on the first:

- (1) Through a special category of linguistic understanding called *intellectual understanding*, we can have apriori warrant to believe (and even know) that someone asserted that P; we can have apriori warrant and knowledge about speech acts. Call this Burge’s *apriori comprehension thesis*.²
- (2) In such cases of apriori warranted belief that someone asserted that P, if we accept the assertion (if we transition from understanding the assertion to belief in the content of the assertion), then we enjoy an apriori warrant to believe that P. We can have apriori warrant for testimony-based beliefs. Call this Burge’s *apriori testimonial warrant thesis*.

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¹ Burge’s papers on linguistic understanding and beliefs formed through linguistic understanding (testimony-based beliefs, the process he calls *interlocution*) include ‘Content Preservation’ (1993), ‘Interlocution, Perception, and Memory’ (1997), ‘Reason and the First Person’ (1998a), ‘Computer Proof, Apriori Knowledge, and Other Minds’ (1998b), ‘Comprehension and Interpretation’ (1999b), ‘A Warrant for Belief in Other Minds’ (2011b), and ‘Postscript: “Content Preservation”’ (2011a).

² Burge aficionados will know that he prefers the broader expression ‘present-as-true’ over ‘assertion’ for the speech acts he’s interested in, though at times he is happy to use ‘assertion’. For the most part I shall use ‘assertion’ instead of ‘present-as-true’, but the reader should be aware that by ‘assertion’ I mean to refer to a broad category of constative speech acts, and not some narrow or special category. For some discussion of the breadth of the category, see my ‘Testimony as Speech Act, Testimony as Source’ (Graham 2015).

- (3) If in these further cases, the sender knows apriori that P, we may then learn (come to know) apriori that P through acceptance ourselves. Apriori knowledge in a sender can enable apriori knowledge in a recipient. We can have apriori knowledge through testimony. Call this Burge's *apriori testimonial knowledge thesis*.

These theses are clearly surprising. Even restricted to a special category, to know that someone asserted that P mustn't I first perceive—see or hear—an utterance? How then could I possibly have apriori warrant to believe that someone has asserted that P? And then, if I believe the assertion, how could I possibly thereby enjoy apriori warrant to believe P? Apriori warrant and knowledge *about* speech acts? Apriori warrant and knowledge *through* testimony? How could this be?³

Though Burge developed and defended his surprising theses across a series of papers, by 2011 he changed his mind.⁴ He now believes that our warrant to believe that someone asserted that P, and the warrant we acquire when we believe testimony, is always empirical. Burge, like his many critics, now finds his surprising theses too surprising to maintain.

Even so, this chapter is about Burge's surprising claims, his reasons for them, and his eventual reasons for changing his mind. But if Burge gave up on his theses, why read this chapter? Burge's theses, his reasons for and against, make up some of the most interesting work in epistemology in the last twenty-five years. But his theses, and especially his reasons for and against, are not well-understood. And so in this chapter I aim to convey a thorough understanding of his theses, and his reasons for and against. If you are after such an understanding, should read this chapter. I shall also take this as an opportunity to discuss Anna-Sara Malmgren's well-known paper criticizing Burge's theses.⁵ Once we understand Burge's theses and his reasons, we will be well-poised to examine Malmgren's counter-considerations.

1. Burge on Apriori Warrant

To support his three surprising claims, Burge will rely on his conception of apriori warrant. I will start there before turning to his views about linguistic understanding and acceptance. Here's Burge's conception in outline form:

1. There are two traditional criteria:
 - a. The negative criterion. A warrant for belief is apriori if and only if it does not derive its warranting force from sense experience, from perception or sensing.⁶
 - b. The positive criterion. "Apriori warrants derive from reason or understanding, or the nature of a capacity that functions to contribute to reason or understanding."⁷ "Traditionally, a justification or entitlement was apriori if it could be derived from conceptual understanding."⁸

³ Burge's critics include Biro 1995, Casullo 2007a, 2007b, Christensen and Kornblith 1997, Malmgren 2006, 2013, and Neta 2010, among others.

⁴ See Burge 2013b: 31, 36; 2011a: 273-284; 2011b: 373

⁵ Malmgren 2006. Cf. Malmgren 2013.

⁶ Burge 2013b: 2, 3

⁷ Burge 2011b: 367

⁸ Burge 1993: 246; See also Burge 1998a: 401

2. Super-warrants are infallible, indubitable, rationally unrevisable, immune from empirical defeat. Not all apriori warrants, however, are super-warrants:
 - a. An apriori warrant is not *eo ipso* infallible. “One can have an apriori warrant—short of a proof—to believe a complex mathematical proposition; but the belief may be mistaken.”⁹
 - b. An apriori warrant is not *eo ipso* indubitable. One might have a warrant but doubt the proposition. One might be timid. One might insufficiently understand the warrant or the proposition. One might have a counter-warrant and then rationally doubt the warrant.¹⁰
 - c. An apriori warrant is not *eo ipso* unrevisable. Because warrants are not infallible, they are susceptible to counter-considerations. Hence, they are revisable.
 - d. Apriori warrants can even be empirically revised when we have empirical evidence that we are not functioning normally. The source of support is one thing. Sources of possible defeat are another.¹¹
 - e. A few apriori warrants are infallible and rationally unrevisable, e.g. “our warrants to believe instances of pure *cogito* thoughts and some warrants to believe certain simple logical and mathematical truths.”¹² Some apriori warrants may be super-warrants. The warrant for the *cogito* may be an apriori super-warrant.

3. Apriori and empirical warrants combine in various ways:
 - a. An apriori warranted belief can also be empirically warranted.¹³ “We have apriori warrant to believe simple arithmetical beliefs, through understanding them.”¹⁴ We may also have empirical warrant to believe mathematical truths through counting perceived objects, or the role of mathematics in empirical science.
 - b. Just as an *empirical* warrant for a belief can be an empirical entitlement or an empirical justification, an *apriori* warrant for a belief can either be an apriori entitlement or an apriori justification. Apriori warrants are entitlements or justifications.¹⁵

⁹ Burge 2013b: 4

¹⁰ Burge 2013b: 4; 1993: 231-2

¹¹ Burge 1993a: 231-2; 1997: 291-2; 2011b: 368-9; 2013b: 4

¹² Burge 2013b: 5

¹³ Burge 2011b: 368

¹⁴ Burge 2013b: 6

¹⁵ Burge distinguishes two kinds of warrants: entitlements and justifications. In ‘Content Preservation’ and ‘Perceptual Entitlement’ he drew this distinction in terms of *access to reasons*. Justifications were warrants—exercises of good routes to truth and knowledge—that involved accessible reasons. Entitlements were warrants that did not involve accessible reasons.

By 2011 he abandoned this way of drawing the distinction. He now draws the distinction in terms of *operative reasons*, accessible or not. Justifications are warrants—exercises of good routes to truth—that involve operative reasons. Entitlements are warrants that do not involve reasons. (2013a) Operative reasons are either propositions in self-sufficient beliefs (such as *cogito* cases and understanding simple logical and mathematical truths) or warranted premises in exercises of deductive or inductive reasoning. I shall rely on his more recent formulation throughout. For discussion, see my ‘What is Epistemic Entitlement?’ (forthcoming).

- c. Contributions to the overall warrant for a belief can be apriori or empirical. If any element in the contribution to the overall warrant is empirical, overall warrant is empirical. Many overall warrants enjoy a mix of apriori and empirical elements.
4. The kind of competence does not always guarantee the kind of warrant:
- a. Perceptual belief is always empirically warranted. Some forms of understanding are always apriori warranted. Warrant from understanding self-evidence is always apriori.
 - b. Purely preservative memory does not generate, but merely preserves, warrant. Preservative memory is neutral. It depends on the original source of warrant. If the original warrant is empirical, so is the preserved warrant. If the original warrant is apriori, the preserved warrant is apriori.¹⁶
 - c. Reasoning is likewise neutral. The warrant for a conclusion of inductive reasoning depends on the warrant for the premises. Typically, the warrants include empirical warrants, and so the conclusion is empirically warranted. But forms of inductive reasoning are used in mathematics, where the warrants for the premises are apriori. Hence, there are apriori warranted inductively supported conclusions.¹⁷ For the same reasons the conclusions of exercises of deductive reasoning are apriori or empirical, depending on the warrants for the premises. There are empirically warranted deductively established conclusions.
5. Apriori warrant is not restricted to eternal propositions. The *cogito* is a paradigm case.
- a. In the *cogito*, sense-perception does not contribute to the warrant. The warrant arises through understanding the content of the thought.
 - b. In the *cogito* and *cogito*-type cases, we are warranted in believing in the existence of certain thought occurrences. We can be apriori warranted in believing that I am thinking, that I am thinking the thought that water is wet, that it is thought that P, that a thought is occurring, and so on.¹⁸
 - c. These are cases of the contingent apriori; the warranted beliefs are contingent, non-necessary.

This last point shall prove important for Burge's first thesis. For just as we can know apriori that there is a thought or that I am thinking, Burge will argue that we can know apriori that P is asserted, that someone asserted that P.

Many of Burge's points about apriori warrant are by now very familiar. Some are widely shared. Some are controversial. Our goal here is not to defend or deny this conception, but to understand how Burge relies on it to support his surprising theses.

2. Understanding and Acceptance

Our topic is then Burge's three surprising claims. Burge restricts his claims to a class of beliefs about, and through, testimony. His claims do not apply to any belief about an assertion, or any

¹⁶ Burge 1997: 301-2

¹⁷ Burge 1998: 309

¹⁸ Burge 2011b: 368. 1998a: 401

testimony-based belief. But before seeing how he identifies the class of beliefs, we should get a handle on his general view on the epistemology of beliefs about and through testimony. And since his view about the epistemology of beliefs about and through testimony in particular fall within his general view on warrant, I should first explain how we see warrant.

Warrant is a Good Route to Truth

Burge approaches epistemology from a non-skeptical starting point. He assumes we have considerable knowledge through perception, introspection, understanding, interlocution, memory, associative inference, deductive and inductive reasoning, critical reasoning and reflection. To one degree or another, these are all belief-forming and sustaining competencies that form or sustain reliably true beliefs when functioning normally in normal conditions.

He then takes a broadly externalist, proper function, competence reliabilist approach to warrant and knowledge. Like many others, Burge rejects the hyper-intellectualist idea that our knowledge through the normal exercise of these competences requires that we possess a meta-justification establishing that our competencies are reliable or that they are functioning normally. Knowledge that arises through a competence rests on its reliability in normal conditions, not our ability to show that it is reliable.

Besides true belief, knowledge entails warrant, the absence of defeat, and the absence of Gettier failures. The core notion is epistemic warrant. For Burge, a belief is *prima facie* warranted when formed or sustained through the normal exercise of belief-forming competence that is reliable in normal conditions. Beliefs normally formed through perception, introspection, interlocution, and so on, are *prima facie* warranted for these competencies are reliable in normal circumstances. Warrant requires reliability in normal circumstances for the function of warrant is to provide an especially secure route to truth and knowledge. Though warrant is an especially good route to truth and knowledge, warrant does not always guarantee truth. There are warranted—not merely excusable or blameless—false beliefs.

A belief for Burge is then *prima facie* warranted when formed through the normal operation(s) of reliable belief-forming competence(s); warrant is the normal exercise of reliable competence. In perception, for example, the warrant for a perceptual belief resides in the normal transition from sensory stimulation to the formation of a perceptual representation and then the normal transition to a belief that conceptualizes the representation.¹⁹

When Burge says that we have an *entitlement to rely* on a competence, he means two things. First, he means the negative point that we don't need a meta-justification of the reliability of the competence to acquire knowledge through the competence. Second, he means the positive point that our knowledge arises through the reliability of the competence. Burge calls this right to rely on a competence a *general* entitlement. We might also call it a *license* to rely on the competence.

That's a brief sketch of Burge's general view of warrant. How does he think this view applies to the epistemologies of understanding—belief *about* testimony—and acceptance—belief *through* testimony?

Two Competences, Two Principles

Burge holds an “anti-reductionist” view about the epistemologies of understanding and acceptance. According to the anti-reductionist, we enjoy a general entitlement to take *apparent*

¹⁹ For Burge on warrant, see Burge 2003, 2010, 2013a, and 2019. For further discussion, see Graham 2019a, 2019b, forthcoming-a, and Graham and Pedersen 2020.

understanding as of others as having presented-as-true that P as *genuine* understanding,²⁰ and another general entitlement to *accept* the content of what we understand others to present-as-true. We can express both as principles:

The Understanding Principle: A person has a general, prima facie epistemic right (a license) to take seeming understanding as of someone's presentation-as-true that P as genuine understanding. We have a prima facie general epistemic right to transition from a representation as of someone asserted that P to the belief that someone asserted that P.

The Acceptance Principle: A person has a general, prima facie epistemic right (a license) to accept as true something that is taken to be presented-as-true.²¹ We have a prima facie general epistemic right to transition from the representation that someone asserted that P to the belief that P.

The Understanding Principle means we do not need a meta-justification for the reliability of our competence to understand others' presentations-as-true (their assertions, in a broad sense). The Acceptance Principle means we do not need a meta-justification for the reliable truth of others' presentations-as-true to form warranted beliefs in the contents presented-as-true. These general entitlements *reside* in, or *rest* on, reliable belief-forming competencies. Where there are reliable competences, there are epistemic principles granting general entitlements. The first resides in our reliable competence to understand presentations-as-true.²² The second resides in the first and the reliability of interlocution in normal conditions. The reliability of acceptance partly depends on the reliability of understanding.²³

Applications of these two principles (particular exercises of the reliable competences) yield prima facie warrants. If Alice presents-as-true that Bob is on his way to the party, then given

²⁰ For convenience, I shall write as if understanding an assertion always involves the belief that someone asserted that P. *Apparent* understanding involves the belief that someone asserted that P, true or false. *Genuine* understanding requires true belief. But see David Hunter (1998), who argued that veridical understanding of an assertion does not involve, or is not the same as, the belief that someone asserted that P. One might also wonder whether linguistic understanding requires concepts for speech acts. For example, children understand assertions, but do they have the concept of assertion? For some discussion of these issues, see Burge 2011a: 275; 2011b: 371; Pettit 2002, Malmgren 2006; Longworth 2008a; and Graham 2015.

²¹ Burge 1993: 237; 1997: 287, n. 4. In the present context, "acceptance" of testimony entails belief in the content understood as asserted. For discussions in favor of the Acceptance Principle, see Coady 1992, Burge 1993, 2011a, Graham 2006a, 2006b, 2016, 2018, Owens 2000, 2017, and Shieber 2015, among others. We shall proceed as if both principles are true, that understanding and acceptance are reliable competencies. But note well that the Acceptance Principle does not entail any of Burge's surprising claims under discussion here. Burge also argued in 'Content Preservation' that it is apriori necessarily true that interlocution is reliable in normal conditions when functioning normally. Though he abandoned the three theses that we are examining in the text, he has not abandoned this thesis about the rational basis for the reliability of interlocution. For discussion of Burge's argument that interlocution is apriori reliable, see my 'Sincerity and the Reliability of Testimony' (Graham 2018)

²² "The reliability of the competence is the main source of the individual's warrant. One develops a competence to take in what other people say" (Burge 1999b: 346, 355). Our entitlement to comprehend "what others say...is normally warranted through an entitlement that resides in the reliability of a competence to comprehend another's utterance" (Burge 2013b: 34).

²³ Burge 2011a: 273; 2011b: 371.

your first competence, you enjoy a prima facie warrant to believe that Alice asserted that Bob is on his way. If you accept her presentation-as-true, then given your second competence, you enjoy a prima facie warrant to believe that Bob is on his way.

For the sake of argument, I will assume that both principles are true, that understanding and acceptance are both competencies that reliably produce true beliefs in normal conditions when functioning normally. Our issue is not whether these claims are true. Our issue is whether exercises of these competencies sometimes provide apriori warrant to form beliefs about and through testimony.

3. Intellectual Understanding

Burge's first surprising thesis is that sometimes we have apriori warrant to believe that someone asserted that P, but only about a certain class or category of beliefs about assertions. The second and third theses are then restricted to beliefs (acceptances) formed through beliefs about assertions in this special category. So what category is that? Burge's special category consists in understandings that only involve the exercise of a competence Burge calls *intellectual understanding*.

Comprehension vs. Interpretation

To describe this competence, Burge first steps back and distinguishes between *constant* and *contextual* elements in a language. Constant elements in a language are those parts of speech that do not require knowledge of the context of use to understand. Constant elements include (but are not limited to) logical constants, common nouns, verbs, prepositions, and adjectives. We are very good at understanding occurrences of constant elements. In normal circumstances, our competence is highly reliable, fast, nearly automatic, and non-inferential at the personal level; it is a modular transition from representations of sounds and text to reliably accurate understandings of content and force.²⁴

Understanding contextual elements requires knowing something about the context of use, like who is speaking, the time of utterance, the direction of a demonstration, and so on. Contextual elements include (but are not limited to) indexicals, tense, demonstratives, and proper names. Understanding occurrences of contextual elements involves knowing specific features of the context, background knowledge, and generalized intelligence. Knowing the referent of a demonstrative or a proper name isn't linguistic knowledge alone. You've got to know features of the context. Knowledge of context plays another role when the speaker's meaning is at odds with ordinary meaning, as in irony, humor or metaphor, or when speaker's meaning goes beyond ordinary meaning, as in conversational implicature. Getting jokes isn't simply a matter of knowing the language.

Burge then distinguishes two competencies in linguistic understanding: *comprehension* and *interpretation*. Comprehension names our competence for understanding constant elements. It is a modular, non-personal level processing the results in a person-level representation of content and force. Comprehension is an epistemically immediate, unreasoned, and non-inferential reliable competence; we reliably comprehend constant elements. Given the reliability of

²⁴ Burge 1999b: 353-355; 2011a: 277-8; 2011b: 371; 2013b: 30 n. 20, 34-5. Though controversial, many of these points are familiar and widely accepted.

comprehension in normal conditions, we enjoy a prima facie warrant to take our seeming comprehensions of the constant elements in the content of speech acts as genuine. “Seeming comprehension provides a defeasible epistemic entitlement to presume genuine understanding.”²⁵

Interpretation names our use of knowledge of the context, background knowledge and general intelligence to facilitate understanding. When comprehension is not enough for understanding, interpretation kicks in.²⁶ Interpretation is largely if not always inferential. It is a person-level inference from representations of words, meanings, contexts, mannerisms, speech acts, and so on, to understanding.

Comprehension and interpretation are different psychological competencies underwriting linguistic understanding. Sometimes one or the other is enough. Sometimes both are required.

What about understanding force? Is that comprehension or interpretation?

In general, Burge claims, where we comprehend content, we comprehend force.²⁷ But how do we comprehend force? By comprehending mood, the default marker of force. Interpretation is not required when there are default markers that are a part of our standing linguistic competence that guides our understanding, and there is no indication that the default has been overridden.²⁸ Indicative (declarative) mood is the default (fallible) marker of assertive force. By comprehending indicative mood, we (fallibly) comprehend assertive force. Understanding a presentation-as-true *as* a presentation-as-true is then typically comprehension, not interpretation.²⁹

That’s Burge on linguistic understanding in general. There’s a lot worth critically discussing, but we’ll have to leave that for another occasion. I will take it for granted for now.

Completely Conceptual Comprehension

We can now characterize *intellectual understanding*. As should become evident, one might call it *completely conceptual comprehension* instead.³⁰

Suppose I say “that is brand new” while pointing at something on my desk. You then perceive my demonstration and line of sight and thereby see what I mean. In Burge-speak, you have used perception-backed *de re* cognition to understand my meaning.

Now imagine that someone asserts the following two contents:

Cats are smaller than elephants.
2 is a prime number.

Did you need to look around or rely on background information, especially background empirical information, to understand? Did you deploy perception-backed *de re* cognition? Burge thinks not. To understand these two presentations-as-true, comprehension—mastery of the concepts expressed by the constant elements—is enough.

Intellectual understanding is then understanding of content and force—comprehension—without perception backed *de re* cognition. Why does he call it *intellectual* understanding?

²⁵ Burge 1999b: 353; 1997: 291.

²⁶ Burge 1999b: 359.

²⁷ Burge 1993: 247-8; 1997: 286, 289-90; 1998a: 2011b: 340, 370

²⁸ Burge 1999b: 359-60

²⁹ Cf. Borge 2003.

³⁰ Burge 2011a: 275.

Because you only need to exercise intellectual capacities (mastery of concepts) to understand content; you do not need to “look around.” The same is true for understanding force, Burge asserts. Understanding “assertive mode,” he says, “is commonly intellectual.”³¹

Cases like these are commonplace. The mathematical example obviously generalizes: *7 is a prime number, 3 is greater than five, every even number is the sum of two primes*. The zoology example generalizes: *zebras are larger than red poppies*. You can pile on cases involving artefacts: *chairs are meant for sitting, couches are more expensive than foot stools*. Any science will provide countless examples: *plants are not animals, rain nourishes plants*. You get the picture.³²

Instances of intellectual understanding may be rare. In most cases we may have to “look around” to understand what our interlocutors mean, never mind engage in interpretation to complete our understanding.³³ What matters for Burge is not whether they are rare or frequent, but only whether they are possible.

Knowledge of the Sender: Two Routes

On Burge’s view, when a perceived utterance triggers an exercise of intellectual understanding, intellectual understanding on its own only suffices to warrant the proposition it is asserted that P, or that P is asserted. But understanding (in the sense of the intellect) also provides warrant to conclude that someone asserted that P, for we know apriori that there is no assertion without an asserter, just as we know apriori that there is no thought (no event of thinking on an occasion) without a thinker. That’s why, up to now, I have discussed Burge’s first thesis as a thesis about our warrant to believe someone has asserted that P. So I assume that if intellectual understanding provides warrant to believe it is asserted that P, it also provides warrant to believe someone has asserted that P.

Does intellectual understanding provide warrant to believe who that someone is? Does it provide knowledge of the asserter? Can we figure out *who* said such and such without, as it were, looking around? No.³⁴ Although Burge doesn’t talk about our knowledge of the particular speaker, it is plain from other things he says that intellectual understanding won’t suffice. For example, when we perceive and understand a particular utterance at a particular time, “what one is entitled to on intellectual grounds” does not include anything “about time, form, or circumstances of the assertion. All such information is epistemically grounded in perception of aspects of the context.”³⁵ Just as we need perception to identify the time or the form of the assertion, so too we need perception of some sort to identify the particular interlocutor. In cases

³¹ Burge 1997: 286.

³² Burge 1997: 286.

³³ Burge 1997: 287. If work from pragmatics over the last twenty years or so is correct, then there may be considerably fewer cases than even Burge imagined. I refer to *semantic underdeterminacy*, the fact that the conventional meanings of one’s words when making an utterance significantly underdetermine one’s meaning (the speaker’s meaning, and so what is presented-as-true, as well as what is conversationally implicated). Perhaps even the cases Burge imagines requires interpretation for understanding. This is the issue Anne Bezuidenhout’s (1998) discussion of ‘Content Preservation’ raises. See especially Bezuidenhout 1998: 279-80. But for some further discussion on Burge’s side of the issue, even given the scope of semantic underdetermination, see Recanati 2002. I shall table this issue.

³⁴ Self-knowledge that I have judged (and so presented-as-true) is an exception to this rule. Neta (2010) and Malmgren (2013) discuss this case.

³⁵ Burge 1993: 249.

of intellectual understanding, we know that someone asserted that P through one route, and we know the particular person through another.

So how do we know who the particular speaker is on an occasion? If intellectual understanding warrants the belief that someone asserted that cats are smaller than elephants, perception backed *de re* cognition, of one form or another, is still required to know *who made the assertion*. Intellectual understanding can get us to it is asserted that cats are smaller than elephants and then to someone asserted that cats are smaller than elephants. But intellectual understanding cannot get us all the way to Phillip asserted that cats are smaller than elephants. Some other source (typically perception) tells us that. Perceiving the utterance triggers intellectual understanding. Perceiving the source of the utterance—Phillip—triggers perceptual recognition that it's Phillip who's speaking. Combined I come to know that Phillip asserted cats are smaller than elephants. So intellectual understanding warrants the existential belief that someone asserted that P. Perception then warrants the belief that it was Phillip in particular that made the assertion.

That two competences are required to know that some particular person made the assertion that P shouldn't be too surprising, for more than one kind of competence frequently combine to underwrite knowledge. I know by vision that a certain object has a certain shape, and I know that objects with that shape are fossils of a certain kind in some other way. Two competences seamlessly combine to explain my knowledge that that₁ is a fossil. Or to take another example, I know by vision that₁ is a triangle. I also know apriori that the interior angles of a triangle sum to 180 degrees. Two competences combine to explain my knowledge that the interior angles of that₁ object sum to 180 degrees.

Why Intellectual Understanding?

We've now identified Burge's special class. Why does he need this category? His answer is straightforward. Burge's first surprising thesis is that there are cases where a recipient forms the belief someone asserted that P though an exercise of intellectual understanding where the warrant for the belief is apriori. But if comprehension of the speech act—content and force—required looking around—if it required perception backed *de re* cognition—then the warrant for comprehension of the content and force would derive from sense perception. The warrant would then be empirical. So unless comprehension of content and force is sometimes purely intellectual—unless there are cases of completely conceptual comprehension—Burge's case for his first surprising thesis, and hence his second and third theses, cannot even get off the ground.³⁶ Showing that there are cases of intellectual understanding is a necessary first step.³⁷

³⁶ Burge makes this point in a footnote in 'Content Preservation': "I am abstracting, in this discussion of application [of the Understanding and Acceptance Principles to cases], from cases where understanding a particular content itself involves perceiving—for example, perceiving the referents of demonstratives. Such understanding is not purely conceptual; and as a consequence, the relevant entitlement to the particular belief is partly perceptual" (Burge 1993: 247, n. 19.) Then in his 1997: "[Our] entitlement to accept what [our interlocutors] tell us often fails to be apriori because our understanding is not purely intellectual. Often understanding what another person says involves seeing what the person is pointing to" (Burge 1997: 297). "I always took [comprehension that involves *de re* perception-backed representation] to be warranted empirically" (2011a: 275). See also Burge 1997: 298; 1998a: 402, n. 15; 1999b: 359.

³⁷ In her 2006, Malmgren underappreciates the exact role intellectual understanding plays in Burge's account. In her 2013 she shows a stronger appreciation. In both she seems to think intellectual understanding is enough to understand uses of proper names. Her central example to illustrate Burge's thesis in her 2013 is

But it is only a first step, for this step is entirely compatible, given everything that has been said so far, with denying Burge's surprising claims. Even in cases of intellectual understanding, one might argue, the warrant for comprehension is empirical, for the recipient must still *perceive* the utterance. Establishing that there are cases of completely conceptual comprehension of speech acts does not yet establish Burge's thesis that our warrant to believe someone asserted that P is sometimes apriori. We still have more to cover before we turn to Burge's reasons for his surprising claims.

4. The Structure of Testimonial Warrant

In this section I expound a view of the structure of warrants for testimony-based beliefs. I shall do this so that I can more precisely state Burge's surprising theses and then give some examples, so as to ensure a firm grip on his three claims.

Suppose a recipient understands a sender to have asserted that P. Given the Understanding Principle, she is then *prima facie* warranted in believing that someone has asserted that P. Understanding (linguistic understanding as a reliable competence) has generated a warrant to believe someone has asserted that P. Suppose she then accepts that P. When she believes that P, how might we describe the structure of the various warrants her belief might enjoy?

Given the Acceptance Principle, her belief that P is *prima facie* warranted. Acceptance (interlocution as a reliable competence) has generated a warrant to believe P. In transitioning from understanding to acceptance, a new warrant is born. Let's call this new warrant the *recipient's default proprietary warrant*. That's the first warrant in the structure of warrants that her belief might enjoy.

This default warrant does not guarantee that the recipient's belief is true or knowledge. It may fall short of truth for various reasons. The interlocutor might be sincere but mistaken. Maybe the interlocutor lied. Warranted false acceptances, like other kinds of warranted false beliefs, are unsurprising.³⁸

She might have other warrants in support of her belief that P. She might have background knowledge in support of P, or in support of the trustworthiness of her interlocutor. Burge calls the combination of the recipient's default proprietary warrant with any other warrants she has in favor of P the *recipient's own proprietary warrants*.³⁹

Are these warrants enough to turn true belief into knowledge? No. "The recipient's own proprietary [warrant] to rely on interlocution is insufficient by itself to underwrite knowledge."⁴⁰ This may happen if the interlocutor—or someone in the chain of sources—lacks the knowledge that P. Here's Burge:

the assertion that Bettie likes chocolate cake. Burge would disagree. Proper names, for Burge, function like complex demonstratives, and require knowledge of the context for understanding (Burge 1973). Malmgren's example isn't solely a case of intellectual understanding. In her 2006 she often discusses the assertion that it is raining (2006: 220). This assertion includes a hidden indexical or contextual element required for understanding. Understanding the content of the assertion would require contextual, not solely intellectual, understanding. This example doesn't illustrate Burge's category either. She notes this but does not correct for it (2006: 224).

³⁸ Burge 1993: 241; 1997: 291; 1998: 311-312.

³⁹ Burge 1993: 250-1.

⁴⁰ Burge 1993: 251.

If the recipient depends on interlocution for knowledge, the recipient's knowledge depends on the source's [or someone in the chain of sources] having knowledge as well. For if the source does not believe the proposition, or if the proposition is not true, or if the source is not [warranted], the recipient cannot know the proposition.

In a footnote, Burge describes such failures as Gettier cases:

The recipient's dependence for having knowledge on the interlocutor's having knowledge [or someone in the chain of sources] is itself an instance of the Gettier point. The recipient could have [warranted] true belief, but lack knowledge because the interlocutor [or the chain] lacked knowledge.... The recipient's own [warrant] is incomplete and implicitly refers back, anaphorically, to fuller justification or entitlement.⁴¹

On Burge's view, the *force* of the warrants in the particular chain of communication thereby helps explain the recipient's *knowledge* through acceptance. What do I mean? I certainly do not mean that the *elements* in the extended body of warrants are somehow *transferred* to the recipient. If the sender expresses perceptual knowledge, the reliable exercise of interlocutor's perceptual system and the interlocutor's perceptual representations are not somehow magically transferred to the recipient. If the sender knows a proof, the recipient doesn't "grasp" it just by believing the assertion; the sender's proof is not injected into the recipient's mind. Instead, the elements of the sender's warrant—the sender's proof—are then a part of the good route to truth that extends from the sender to the receiver. The elements in the external body of warrants are then a part of the recipient's overall good route to truth. That's what I mean.

Knowledge through interlocution thus depends not just on the recipient's own proprietary warrants, but also on the *external body of warrants*—the entitlements and justifications in the chain of communication. In this respect (on Burge's view), interlocution works like purely preservative memory: it *preserves* the *force* of previous warrants in the chain.

Thus, in one sense interlocution *generates* warrant (the recipient's own prima facie, defeasible default proprietary warrant that arises from the general reliability of interlocution applied to the particular exercise of the receiver's reliable competence), and in another sense interlocution *preserves* warrant (it preserves the force of the external warrants in the particular chain of communication).⁴²

The structure of testimonial warrants then includes:

- The recipient's generated default proprietary warrant

⁴¹ Burge 1993: 251, fn. 24. Burge came to qualify his view that knowledge through acceptance depends on knowledge *per se* in the chain of sources, for there are cases where a recipient acquired knowledge that P through dependence on the chain of communication, but no-one in the chain of communication knows that P. Even so, there must be a relevant explanatory body of warrants in the chain of communication; the chain of communication must still be a good route to truth. See Burge 2011a: 254-264. See also Graham 2000, 2006c, 2017.

⁴² See also Malmgren 2006: 218-219. Various philosophers are not happy with Burge's view (at least on my reading) that interlocution both generates and preserves warrant. Casullo (2007b), for example, thinks it can only generate warrant. Goldberg (2017), on the other hand, thinks it can only preserve warrant. See also Edwards 2000, Longworth 2008b, and Gerken 2012. I discuss these issues in 'The Structure of Testimonial Warrant'.

- The recipient’s other proprietary warrants
- The preserved external warrants: the body of warrants in the chain of sources

Altogether they form what Burge calls the *extended body of warrants*.⁴³ To understand Burge’s surprising claims about testimony and the scope of apriori warrants—especially his second and third claims—you’ll need the ability to sort through these various warrants.

With this structure in place, we can now more precisely state Burge’s three surprising theses:

- (1) *The apriori comprehension thesis*. The warrant for a recipient’s belief that someone asserted that P, when formed purely through intellectual understanding, is apriori. There can be apriori warrant to believe someone asserted that P.⁴⁴
- (2) *The apriori testimonial warrant thesis*. In cases where the warrant to believe someone asserted that P is apriori, if the recipient then transitions to the belief that P, the recipient’s own proprietary default prima facie warrant to believe that P is also apriori. If the recipient has no other proprietary warrants to believe that P, or the other warrants are also apriori, then the recipient’s own proprietary body of warrants is entirely apriori. There can be apriori warranted testimony-based belief.⁴⁵
- (3) *The apriori testimonial knowledge thesis*. In cases where the recipient’s own proprietary warrants are entirely apriori, and the sender’s warrants for the belief that P are entirely apriori, then the recipient’s total body of warrants through testimony is apriori. If the sender’s warrants suffice for knowledge, then the hearer’s knowledge through testimony is apriori. There can be apriori knowledge through testimony.⁴⁶

Though all three theses should be clear by now, let me elaborate a little on the reasoning behind the third thesis. We assume interlocution preserves the force of the sender’s body of warrants, or the body of warrants in the chain of communication. If the sender’s body of warrants for the belief that P is entirely apriori, then the extended body of warrants is entirely apriori. Just as the warrant for a belief preserved by memory is apriori or empirical depending on the status of

⁴³ Cf. Burge 1993: 251.

⁴⁴ Burge 1993: 243-250; 1997: 285; 2011a: 273. Since the warrant is an entitlement, the warrant is an apriori entitlement. Hence there are apriori entitlements Why is the warrant to believe that someone asserted that P entitlement, not justification? The belief that someone asserted that P is not self-evident (and so does not include a reason as a contribution to its warrant), and the exercise of comprehension does not involve deductive or inductive reasoning from warranted premises (and so the warrant for the belief does not involve reasons). Thus, the individual’s warrant is an entitlement, not a justification. “[U]nderstanding a communicated message yields an entitlement” (Burge 1993: 246, n. 19).

⁴⁵ And since the transition from the belief that someone asserted that P to the belief that P does not involve either deductive or inductive reasoning from warranted premises that would help explain the belief-worthiness of P for the individual, the warrant for the belief that P via the transition is an entitlement, not a justification. In other words, the warranted belief that someone asserted that P, though it contributes to the receiver’s warrant to believe P because of the reliability of interlocution, is not a reason to believe P. Warrants without reasons are entitlements. This is a second apriori entitlement.

⁴⁶ I discuss qualifications to the transfer of knowledge in ‘Conveying Information’ and ‘Can Testimony Generate Knowledge?’ (Graham 2000, 2006).

the original warrant, so too the force of the warrant for a belief preserved and transferred by interlocution is empirical or apriori depending on the original status of the warrant. If the sender's warrants are entirely apriori, and suffice for knowledge, the recipient will acquire apriori knowledge through interlocution. But if the sender's body of warrants for the belief that P are partly empirical, then the extended body of warrant will not be entirely apriori. In such cases, the recipient will acquire empirical knowledge through interlocution.⁴⁷

To guarantee your mastery of the three theses, let's run through two examples:

Steve knows and then tells Rachel that housecats are smaller than koalas. Rachel intellectually understands Steve's assertion and thereby believes someone asserted that housecats are smaller than koalas. Rachel then accepts Steve's assertion, and so comes to believe that housecats are smaller than koalas. For the sake of argument, suppose that Rachel has no independent grounds to believe that housecats are smaller than koalas. On Burge's view, Rachel acquires an apriori warrant to believe someone asserted that that housecats are smaller than koalas (first thesis) and then an apriori warrant to believe that housecats are smaller than koalas (second thesis). She then also comes to know that housecats are smaller than koalas, for there is knowledge through testimony. Her knowledge, however, is empirical, for it depends for its extended warrant on Steve's *empirical* knowledge that housecats are smaller than koalas. Though she acquires apriori warrant to believe housecats are smaller than koalas, her knowledge so acquired is not apriori but empirical.

Sally knows apriori that 65,537 is a prime number and then tells Rick that 65,537 is a prime number. Rick intellectually understands Sally's assertion and thereby acquires apriori warrant to believe that someone asserted that 65,537 is a prime number (first thesis). Rick then accepts the assertion, and so comes to believe that 65,537 is a prime number. On Burge's second thesis, Rick then acquires an apriori warrant to believe 65,537 is a prime number. For the sake of argument, suppose Rick has no independent grounds to believe that 65,537 is a prime number. Since Sally knows apriori that 65,537 is a prime number, Rick then comes to know that 65,537 is a prime number. His knowledge is apriori, for it anaphorically depends on Sally's apriori knowledge that 65,537 is a prime number (third thesis).⁴⁸

This second example illustrates all three of Burge's surprising claims. Here's Burge:

People who depend on interlocution for knowledge of mathematical theorems but do not know the proofs can have apriori knowledge in this sense. The source mathematician knows the theorem apriori and the recipient is entitled apriori to accept the word of the source, in the absence of reasons to doubt. Most of us knew the Pythagorean theorem at some stage in this manner.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Burge 1993: 251.

⁴⁸ Malmgren says it strikes her "as completely absurd to say that, qua recipient of testimony, you can have apriori warrant for" the belief that "tomatoes grow on vines or...that zebras are larger than red poppies" (Malmgren 2006: 220, 224). Though she does not find the second case involving mathematics plausible, she says it "may not be absurd" (Malmgren 2006: 223-4).

⁴⁹ Burge 1993: 251.

As I said, it all starts with his first claim that our warrant to believe someone asserted that P is sometimes apriori.

Before turning to Burge's reasons in favor of his first thesis, here are three quick defensive points he's made that rely on his conception of apriori warrant:

- i. Any warrant for the belief that someone asserted that P is sure to be fallible, dubitable, revisable, and even empirically defeasible. Even so it does not immediately follow that a belief that someone asserted that P cannot be warranted apriori. The fallibility of understanding and acceptance is no obstacle. Nor is the susceptibility to empirical defeat. Even if all exercises of comprehension of presentations-as-true are subject to empirical defeat, some might still be warranted apriori.⁵⁰
- ii. It is true that we frequently (if not always) have empirical warrant to support a belief that someone asserted that P, or for the belief that P formed through acceptance. Even so, that empirical warrant does not exclude the possibility of an apriori warrant in the body of warrants in some cases. That we always have empirical warrants available for understanding and acceptance is not an obstacle either.
- iii. Though the belief that someone asserted that P is a belief about an occurrence (unlike typical beliefs that enjoy apriori warrant), that does not rule out the possibility that the warrant for the belief someone asserted that P is apriori, for there are apriori warrants for beliefs about occurrences, like the belief that I am thinking or that it is thought that P. Though I made this point already, I believe it is worth repeating just before we turn to Burge's reasons for his first thesis.

Though these points defend his thesis, they do not support it. Let's now turn to reasons in favor of his surprising theses, especially the first.

5. Burge's Considerations

Burge's first step, I said above, was to define the special category of beliefs about speech acts formed through intellectual understanding. That step removed from consideration cases of warranted beliefs about content and force that involved perception backed *de re* cognition to determine content or force. But you might naturally think that it was a first step to nowhere, for even if we sometimes intellectually understand assertions, we still have to *perceive* them first. And if we have to perceive them first, how could the warrant for beliefs formed through intellectual understanding ever be apriori? Even if we don't deploy perception backed *de re* cognition to understand content and force when we intellectually understand an assertion, we still have to perceive the utterance to get the ball rolling. So how could we ever have apriori warrant to believe someone asserted that P?

Burge was fully aware that language *perception* is required for language *comprehension*. Humans perceive utterances to understand them. He repeatedly granted this point. But, Burge thought, maybe we can draw (and then support) a distinction that allows for the surprising

⁵⁰ Burge 1993; 1997: 291; 2011a: 276.

possibility that sometimes intellectual understanding, even though it always involves *perception*, doesn't always rely on *empirical warrant*. Maybe we can distinguish between perception as a *psychologically necessary enabling condition* for intellectual understanding, on the one hand, and perception as a playing *an epistemically warranting role*, on the other. Through perception, we *perceive* utterances. Through conceptual mastery, we *understand* them. Maybe perception *merely* triggers understanding. Maybe the *warrant* for an instance of intellectual understanding comes from *understanding alone*. Maybe perception *enables* a warrant without *generating* a warrant. Burge's reasons for his surprising claims—reasons that we shall finally shortly address—are then reasons to believe that perception merely triggers understanding without itself warranting understanding, that perception enables an apriori warrant from understanding without generating an empirical warrant from perception.

If that's the idea, why should anyone believe it? What, in other words, are Burge's reasons for his first thesis, the thesis on which the other two depend?

I shall review six considerations from Burge. Burge presents them, I believe, as altogether making a cumulative case, not as providing a stepwise deductive argument.

- A reminder.
- A first difference between perception and intellectual understanding.
- A second difference between perception and intellectual understanding.
- An analogy: perceiving diagrams.
- Another analogy: purely preservative memory.
- A thought experiment: the injection argument.

A Reminder: Conceptual Comprehension is not Interpretation

Burge's first reminds us that comprehension is not interpretation. When we comprehend utterances, we understand the constant elements in the utterance through an epistemically immediate, unreasoned, non-inferential, sub-personal modular competence. In comprehension, we immediately form representations of content and force.

But when comprehension is not enough for understanding, interpretation kicks in. "Interpretation arises out of there being a question or issue about how to understand a candidate object of interpretation."⁵¹ In interpretation, unlike comprehension, we take the speaker's words and behavior as an object of epistemic interest. We set out to interpret them, to understand what the speaker means in using those words on that occasion.

Our warrant for instances of interpretation is nearly guaranteed to be empirical. For we nearly always infer the speaker's intent from empirical, knowledge of the speaker's utterance, the context and background knowledge. We first form beliefs about words to infer conclusions about content and force; interpretation rests on (person level) inferences about words.⁵² The result is that "the warrant for most interpretation is empirical."⁵³ If language understanding always involved interpretation (in this sense), then Burge would be stopped dead in his tracks.

⁵¹ Burge 1999b: 350.

⁵² Burge 1999b: 355.

⁵³ Burge 1999b: 352, cf. Burge 1993: 246.

Burge is assuming that intellectual understanding is possible for us. In such cases, the role of perception *might* be merely triggering, merely enabling. So as long as we keep in mind the possibility that not all understanding is interpretation, we'll be open to hearing Burge's case.

To make his case, Burge then notes two differences between ordinary perceptual beliefs and beliefs through intellectual understanding that lead him to think intellectual understanding that someone asserted that P might just be warranted apriori. Perception of an utterance would then enable an apriori warrant through understanding without generating an empirical warrant.

First Difference: The Objects of Perception and Understanding

Here's the first difference. In ordinary visual perception, we perceive and perceptually represent particulars as having shapes, colors, locations, motions, and so on. We may perceive a rolling ball as red, round, moving. We may then perceive a different ball as round and moving, but this time as blue. When perceptual representations cause perceptual beliefs, there is an intimate connection between their representational contents, for perceptual beliefs result from reformatting perceptual attributives into concepts for propositional use. A perceptual belief is then more or less the perceptual representation reformatted. The perceptual belief more or less "takes up" the content of the perceptual state.⁵⁴ As a result, the *objects of cognitive interest* (that's Burge's phrase) in perception and perceptual belief are pretty much the same. We perceive as of that₁ moving red sphere and then believe that that₁ is a moving red sphere.⁵⁵

The connection between language perception and language comprehension differs. In language comprehension, we first perceive and perceptually represent particular sounds and shapes. But we do not then form perceptual beliefs about sound or shapes. Though the information for such beliefs is available in memory, at least for a time, memory soon casts it away.⁵⁶ Instead we transition automatically and non-inferentially at the sub-personal level to representations of the syntax and semantics of the utterance. These representations do not "line up well with the acoustical signal or the shape of written symbols."⁵⁷ Language comprehension does not *conceptualize* perceptual representations. Instead language perception *triggers* "higher-level (syntactical and semantical) cognitive categorizations."⁵⁸ There is then a significant representational difference between the initial perceptions of an utterance and its eventual classification in comprehension.

This results in a clear *shift* in the objects of cognitive interest. In perception, we *perceive marks and sounds*. In comprehension, we *understand content and force*.

When we receive communication...[the] objects of cognitive interest—the contents and their subject matters—are not the objects of perception. We do not perceive the contents of attitudes that are conveyed to us; we understand them.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Burge 1993, 2010, 2019.

⁵⁵ Burge 1993: 245; 2003a.

⁵⁶ "Memory does not retain perceived elements in the physical world, such as the acoustical signal, that are not categorized in linguistically relevant ways" (Burge 2011a: 284).

⁵⁷ Burge 2011a: 284.

⁵⁸ Burge 2011a: 284.

⁵⁹ Burge 1993: 245

The objects of cognitive interest in language *perception* are marks and sounds. The objects of cognitive interest in language *comprehension* are presentations-as-true. *We perceive* marks and sounds. *We understand* content and force.

Second Difference: The Rational Basis of the Reliability of Interlocution

That's the first difference. Here is the second. Burge notes a difference between the explanation for the reliability of perception and perceptual belief, on the one hand, and the reliability of interlocution (of understanding and acceptance), on the other.

Here is what Burge says about perception:

Perceptions or perceptual beliefs about physical objects are constitutively dependent on bearing natural lawlike causal relations to objects of perception—to their subject matter, physical objects. The contents of the beliefs and perceptual are what they are partly because of these relations to specific physical objects or properties. Our entitlement to rely on perception and perceptual beliefs is partly grounded in this causally patterned, content-giving relation which is partly constitutive of perception.⁶⁰

Burge elaborates this conception in 'Perceptual Entitlement'.⁶¹ His idea is that reliable patterns of interaction between types of representations in the perceptual system and instances of the kinds and properties represented by those types partly explains our epistemic warrant to rely on perception.

Here is what he then says about interlocution:

When we receive communication, the situation is different...[In language perception, the] subject matter...of our perceptual experiences and beliefs...word occurrences...bears a non-constitutive (quasi-conventional) relation to the content and subject matter of the belief to which we are entitled as a result of communication...[The] relation between perceived words and their subject matters must involve some sort of explanatory relation...[But the] relation between words and their subject matter and content is not an *ordinary*, natural, lawlike causal-explanatory relation. Crudely speaking, it involves a mind.⁶²

Commenting on this passage in his 1997 paper 'Interlocution, Perception, and Memory' he says:

My emphasis on "ordinary" was meant to indicate that mind-involving relations may be special cases of lawlike, causal-explanatory relations...My concern was not to suggest that the connections are not lawlike or explanatory, but to suggest that they are sometimes *not empirical* connections, from the point of view of understanding epistemic warrant, *because of the role of mind in the connection*.⁶³

What role does the mind play? He continues:

⁶⁰ Burge 1993: 245.

⁶¹ Burge 2003. See also Burge 2010, 2019.

⁶² Burge 1993: 245-6.

⁶³ Burge 1997: 295-6. Emphasis added.

I thought that the role of mind in the relation between words, their subject matter, and their intentional content is relevant in this way: it makes possible an apriori, conceptual, connection between seeming understanding of a putative assertion and being rationally entitled to form beliefs. A seemingly understood putative assertion is a prima facie sign of rational backing for the assertion and rational commitment to truth; and rational backing together with rational commitment constitute a prima facie sign of truth.⁶⁴

Here Burge is relying on his argument for another surprising thesis about the epistemology of testimony that so far I have not mentioned, his thesis that the reliability of interlocution has an apriori basis, that interlocution is necessarily reliable in normal conditions when functioning normally, derived from the nature and functions of propositional reason and reasoning. The Acceptance Principle then has a basis in the nature of reason. Here he is reminding his readers that he has argued that the reliability of interlocution has an explanation in the nature of reason, and since the reliability of testimony presupposes the reliability of understanding, that the reliability of understanding can be explained, at least partly, non-empirically.⁶⁵

Do These Differences Make a Difference?

We now have two differences between perception and comprehension. Do they make a difference? Do they support Burge's surprising claims? Burge certainly thought so. Right after stating these two differences in 'Content Preservation' he concludes that "the accounts of our [warrants] to perception and to interlocution must be different."⁶⁶ But not *just* different. They must be *surprisingly* different if they are to support his surprising claim that we can sometimes know apriori that someone asserted that P. So how do these difference help make his case? What was he thinking?

I think he had two ideas in mind. Recall the two traditional characterizations of a priori warrant:

- a. The negative criterion. A warrant for belief is apriori if and only if it does not derive its warranting force from sense experience, from perception or sensing.⁶⁷
- b. The positive criterion. "Apriori warrants derive from reason or understanding, or the nature of a capacity that functions to contribute to reason or understanding."⁶⁸
"Traditionally, a justification or entitlement was apriori if it could be derived from conceptual understanding."⁶⁹

His first point about differences in cognitive interest suggests that the warrant in intellectual understanding to transition to the belief that it is asserted that P (that someone asserted that P) does not derive its force from sense perception as of words or acoustical signals, for we do not perceive *content and force*. "Strictly speaking, we do not perceive the assertive mode, or the conceptual content, of utterances. We understand them. These are exercises of intellectual

⁶⁴ Burge 1997: 296

⁶⁵ I critically examine Burge's argument for this thesis in 'Sincerity and the Reliability of Testimony: Burge on the A Priori Basis of Testimonial Warrant'.

⁶⁶ Burge 1993: 245.

⁶⁷ Burge 2013b: 2, 3

⁶⁸ Burge 2011b: 367

⁶⁹ Burge 1993: 246; See also Burge 1998a: 401

capacities.”⁷⁰ This suggests that intellectual understanding does not derive its *warranting force* from sense perception. How could perception warrant our beliefs about content and force if we don’t *perceive* content and force? Instead the perceived symbols *trigger* conceptual understanding, then fall to the side. The warrant must reside in understanding alone, not in perception. Both the negative criterion and the positive criterion seem to apply. That seems to be Burge’s thought.

But warrant also requires reliability. In straightforward cases of apriori warrant, conceptual understanding of the concepts involved in the propositional thought themselves ground warrant; self-evident propositional contents explain their own route to truth. But intellectual understanding of presentations-as-true do not ground their own route to truth in this way, for they are hardly self-evident. What then could ground the route to truth? Intellectual understanding might not rely on sense perception for its warranting force, but it still requires reliability for its warranting force.

Burge’s second point (as I understand it) answers this question. The reliability of interlocution involves a mind. It involves apriori, conceptual connections between intelligibility, propositional activity (reasoning and acting for reasons), rationality and truth. The reliability of interlocution—and so comprehension, a presupposition of the reliability of interlocution—is explained by the functioning of capacities that function “to contribute to reason or understanding.” Sometimes the connections that underwrite the reliability of comprehension and acceptance are then “not empirical connections, from the point of view of understanding epistemic warrant, because of the role of mind in the connection.”⁷¹ If the reliability of intellectual understanding results from powers of understanding and reason alone, then this too supports the idea that the force of our warrant to rely on intellectual is apriori, non-empirical.⁷²

These two points thereby suggest that what carries “the positive warranting force” for instances of intellectual understanding of presentations-as-true is “the reliable causal chain and the conceptual competence for comprehension, not the specific content of the perception” of the speaker’s words.⁷³ The warrant is then plausibly apriori, not empirical.

I do not think Burge took either of these considerations alone or in tandem as providing the basis for a deductively valid argument for his first thesis. I think he took them as suggestive considerations, as rendering his thesis plausible, worth taking seriously. This interpretation fits with the fact that he immediately developed two analogies in support of his idea, and then later offered a thought experiment in support as well. Let’s then take Burge’s two “positive” considerations so far— (1) that we don’t perceive but instead understand content and force, and (2) that the reliability of interlocution rests on the nature of reason—as suggestive, non-conclusive, considerations, worth taking seriously, open to further support.⁷⁴ I now turn to those two analogies and the thought experiment. The analogies bolster Burge’s idea that perception can enable a warrant without generating one. The thought experiment purports to show that perception isn’t even necessary to enable a warrant through intellectual understanding.

⁷⁰ Burge 1997: 294.

⁷¹ Burge 1997: 295.

⁷² I acknowledge that my discussion of Burge’s case for the rational basis—the apriori necessary reliability—of understanding and acceptance is probably too compressed here. In my defense, you can find a detailed (and hopefully very clear) presentation of Burge’s reasoning in my ‘Sincerity and the Reliability of Testimony: Burge on the A Priori Basis of Testimonial Entitlement’ (Graham 2018).

⁷³ Burge 2011a: 281.

⁷⁴ Burge 2011a: 273ff.

Perceiving Diagrams: The First Analogy

Burge's first supportive analogy is between perceiving words in comprehension and perceiving symbols or diagrams in logical or mathematical thinking.

Humans have a hard time grasping many logical or mathematical truths and proofs without the aid of perception of symbols or diagrams that express those truths and proofs. For some proofs (especially long ones), perceiving symbols or diagrams (e.g. writing on the chalkboard) may be psychologically necessary (for at least some people some of the time).

On the traditional view of the apriori, perception plays a merely triggering role in these cases. The warrant comes from *understanding* the truths and proofs, not from perceiving the symbols or diagrams. Perception then triggers a warrant without providing one. Hence the distinction Burge needs between perception triggering but not warranting is genuine *in some cases*. Maybe then it also applies in cases of intellectual understanding where we understand, but do not perceive, content and force?⁷⁵ If the distinction works in the case of understanding mathematical contents—themselves purely conceptual—then maybe it works in other cases too, where understanding of content *and force* is also purely conceptual. Hence, by analogy, there is further support for Burge's view. Though we must perceive utterances to understand them, maybe the warrant is from understanding alone, and not from perception.

Purely Preservative Memory: The Second Analogy

Burge's second analogy is between the role of purely preservative memory in deductive reasoning and the role of perception in intellectual understanding.

What is the role of purely preservative memory in deductive reasoning? In deductive reasoning, normally functioning preservative memory keeps the premises in play throughout the reasoning. The warrant for the conclusion comes from the warrant for the premises and the inferential competence, not from memory. Preservative memory does not contribute a warrant of its own for the conclusion. But if memory fails (if memory does not function normally), warrant does not transfer from premises to conclusion. Normal functioning preservative memory is then necessary for the premises in an argument to warrant a conclusion, but normal functioning preservative memory does not contribute a warrant to the conclusion. Purely preservative memory enables, but does not contribute, warrant. It enables warrant to flow from the premises to the conclusion without generating a warrant of its own.

Burge draws the following analogy: just as purely preservative memory is necessary to enable (without generating) a warrant, so too perception in intellectual understanding is necessary to enable (without generating) a warrant to believe that someone asserted that P. The warrant comes from conceptual understanding, not from perception.⁷⁶ Hence, by analogy, there is further support for Burge's view. This analogy, of course, isn't a deductive argument. Analogies never are. But it is suggestive and supportive, as analogies often are.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Burge 2011a: 278.

⁷⁶ Burge 2011a: 280. Burge's point is not that intellectual understanding as of an assertion is purely preservative; Burge's point is that perception's role in intellectual understanding is *like* purely preservative memory; it enables a warrant without generating a warrant.

⁷⁷ This analogy is very different from another analogy Burge draws with purely preservative memory. The other analogy is that *interlocution* sometimes interpersonally preserves and transfers the force of the body of external warrants in the chain of communication from the sender's belief to the recipient's acceptance, just as

A Thought Experiment: The Injection Argument

I now turn to Burge's thought experiment. In a paragraph close to the end of his 1999 paper 'Comprehension and Interpretation', Burge imagines creatures who intellectually understand assertions but without perceiving utterances. Instead, assertions are directly "injected" from one mind to another. Here is how he put the thought experiment in his 2011 postscript:

Suppose that recipients in communication never relied on what they perceived or perceptually believed about utterances in communication in forming their understanding of what was said to them. Suppose that there were a natural, reliable, causal route from interlocutors' intentions in making assertions through some physical medium into the brains of recipients that then reliably caused comprehension. I thought—and still think—that recipients would be warranted and could gain knowledge via such communicative exchanges. If the causal route were part of a natural and reliable psychological competence in understanding another person, then persons could be entitled to rely on it. But the competence would not depend, even causally, on perception or use of one's senses. Perception and sensing would play no role in the account of the positive epistemic force in the warrant. A reliably veridical comprehension competence, supported by a natural causal chain, would suffice.⁷⁸

This thought experiment, Burge thinks, shows that it is *possible* for *some* creatures that do not rely on sense perception (vision, hearing, touch, etc.) for understanding (instead they rely on something like telepathy that directly inputs to intellectual understanding) to have apriori warrants to believe that that P is asserted (hence to believe someone asserted that P). "[E]xercises of comprehension *could* be warranted independently of perception and of sensing. They could depend only on sensitivity of aspects of a causal chain that affects the intellectual faculties directly."⁷⁹

Burge thought this possibility suggested that language perception does not *actually* generate warrant in cases of intellectual understanding. He continues:

I was inclined to think that this counterfactual supposition supported the view that even in actual situations, the nature of perceptual content was inessential to the account of a recipient's warrant to rely on comprehension competence, as long as that competence is in fact reliable in providing comprehension of others' presentations-as-true. What seemed to

memory intrapersonally preserves the force of warrants for stored beliefs over time. That's how we acquire knowledge through acceptance: the recipient's *own proprietary body* of warrants depends on the *external body* of warrants to convert warranted true belief into knowledge. This analogy, however, is relevant for Burge's third surprising thesis, not his first.

Readers sometimes miss the difference between these two analogies. The first analogy does not say that *language comprehension* sometimes *preserves* a warrant. The first analogy is about the warrant to believe someone asserted that P. There is no earlier warrant in the chain of sources to believe *that*. How could language comprehension preserve an earlier warrant in the chain of communication for the belief that someone asserted that P? *That doesn't even make sense..* Burge 1993: 247.

⁷⁸ Burge 2011a: 280.

⁷⁹ Burge 2011a: 280.

carry the positive warranting force was the reliable causal chain and the conceptual competence for comprehension, not the specific content of the perception...⁸⁰

Thus, epistemologically speaking, human intellectual understanding of assertive utterances is more like “injection” than perception. Hence, Burge concludes, even if perception is psychologically necessary *for us* to understand assertions, maybe perception’s role *for us* is merely triggering, not warranting, even so.

Putting it all Together

Those were Burge’s considerations. Adding them all up, Burge mounted rational pressure supporting the idea that language perception might play a *merely* triggering role in the case of intellectual understanding. Warrant would come from understanding instead.

First, cases of intellectual understanding are possible. Not all cases of understanding involve perception-backed *de re* cognition. Not all cases of understanding require interpretation. We can then ask whether cases of intellectual understanding, because they are *triggered* by perception, *must also be warranted by perception*. We can ask whether the warrant is “always empirical...or...sometimes apriori?”⁸¹

Second, in cases of intellectual understanding, we do not *perceive* content and force; we *understand* content and force. *Maybe conceptual mastery suffices for warrant*.

Third, the reliability of interlocution has a rational basis, unlike perception. The reliability of interlocution requires the reliability of understanding. *Maybe then the nature of understanding then suffices for the warranting force of instances of intellectual understanding*.

Fourth, perceiving symbols or diagrams, as in mathematical knowledge, may be psychologically necessary in some cases, but without itself contributing a warrant. *Maybe that’s true for intellectual understanding*.

Fifth, some psychological capacities (e.g. preservative memory) are necessary enablers for warrant without generating or contributing a warrant. *That could also be true for intellectual understanding*.

Sixth, there are possible beings that intellectually understand assertions without perceiving utterances. *Maybe then perception is epistemically inessential (for us) even if psychologically necessary*.

Altogether, these considerations make Burge’s claim that there can be apriori warrant to believe that someone asserted that P—and so his subsequent second and third claims--worth taking seriously. If Burge is right, then though we perceive utterances to understand them, perception of utterances enables a warrant through understanding—an apriori warrant—and does not contribute or general a warrant of its own—an empirical warrant.

One’s entitlement to rely on one’s seeming understanding is fundamentally an entitlement to rely on seeming understanding of instantiations...Its probity or [warranting] force as a rational starting point derives not from experience, but from conceptual understanding...The role of perception is to make [intellectual] understanding possible. But the seeming

⁸⁰ Burge 2011a: 280.

⁸¹ Burge 1999b: 353.

[intellectual] understanding carries the [warranting] force in itself, in abstraction from its generic reliance on perception.⁸²

In intellectual understanding, warrant starts with intellection, not perception. Perception *enables* intellectual understanding; intellectual understanding *warrants* belief. Hopefully now you've acquired a mastery of his theses and his reasons for them.

Even so, Burge himself gave them up. But before we turn to thinking through his reasons for changing his mind, let's examine Anna-Sara Malmgren's reasons from her 2006 paper 'Is there A Priori Knowledge by Testimony?' for thinking that Burge couldn't possibly have been correct. Given everything we have covered together so far, we should be well-poised to understand Malmgren's counter-considerations. Thinking through Malmgren's interpretation and rebuttal should help further deepen our understanding of what Burge was up to, and why he eventually changed his mind.

6. Malmgren's Criticisms

I shall focus on two criticisms Malmgren makes against Burge. The first interprets Burge as relying entirely on a valid but unsound argument. You'll see that Malmgren's interpretation differs from mine. The second is a counterargument.

⁸² Burge 1998a: 402. For the sake of scholarly persuasion, I thought a series of quotes, if only in the notes, might help solidify your understanding of Burge's take on the role of perception in intellectual understanding. First, a series of quotes that perception's role is only enabling: "[A]lthough understanding a communication event as an intelligible propositional assertion always requires the use of perception, in...cases [of intellectual understanding] perception figures as an enabling condition rather than as a contributor to the warrant for the understanding" (Burge 2013b: 30). "[P]erception is necessary for the acquisition of belief through [intellectual] understanding. But...perception functions only as a causal, enabling condition, not as a contributor to the...force of our entitlement" (Burge 1997: 288). "In interlocution, we are...causally dependent on perception. Our entitlements are thus dependent on perception. But...perception contributes nothing to the epistemic force of the fundamental "default" entitlement [for intellectual understanding]" (Burge 1993: 245). "I assume there is always some unconscious psychological transformation from perception of words to understanding. I question whether, if the [instance of intellectual] understanding is to be warranted, the perceptual basis for the transformation *must provide evidence* for that [instance of intellectual] understanding" (1999b: 353). And then second, a series of quotes that our warrant to believe someone asserted that P derives from understanding alone: "[P]erception of words makes [intellectual] understanding possible, but [warranting] force can be derived from the individual's [intellectual] understanding [alone]" (Burge 1993: 247, fn. 19). "[P]erception of expressions is not part of the [warranting] force for accepting the contents...The primary entitlement in interlocution derives from *prima facie* [intellectual] understanding of the messages...not from the role of perception, however, necessary, in the process" (Burge 1993: 246). "We [intellectually] understand events as assertions by perceiving other aspects of assertions. We understand the concepts in assertions, by perceiving expressions of them. But here perception is part of the condition for exercising the intellectual capacity, not—or not normally—part of the warrant for the individual's relying on his [intellectual] understanding. It is a necessary triggering mechanism, but it is not the [intellectual] understanding itself. In the order of epistemic warrant, seeming [intellectual] understanding is a rational starting part" (Burge 1997: 294).

Malgren's Interpretation: The Content-Matching Criterion

Malmgren interprets Burge as arguing as follows:⁸³

- (1) A belief that someone asserted that P is warranted. [By assumption.]
- (2) The warrant is either an entitlement or a justification. [Burge's distinction between two kinds of warrant.]
- (3) The warrant for an instance of comprehension as of a presentation-as-true is not a justification, for in comprehension we do not reason deductively or inductively from perceptual beliefs about sounds or word occurrences to the conclusion that someone asserted that P. Comprehensions are warranted by entitlements, not justifications. (Interpretations, on the other hand, involve justifications. They are nearly always empirically warranted.) [Given Burge's view of comprehension, and his view of entitlement vs. justification.]
- (4) So, the warrant for the belief that someone asserted that P through intellectual understanding is an entitlement. [From (1), (2), (3)]
- (5) The entitlement is empirical or apriori.
- (6) For any belief, a perceptual representation contributes to an entitlement—it contributes warranting force, and so empirical warrant—only if the (non-propositional) content of the perceptual representation and the (propositional) content of the belief are, “as it were, *about the same thing(s)*...For a perceptual state to contribute to an entitlement”—to play a warranting role—“there must be an appropriate match between perception and belief.” The perception and the belief must “represent the same objects and properties.”⁸⁴ Call this the *content-matching criterion*. [Malgren's interpretation of Burge.]
- (7) This criterion is not met in cases of language comprehension. We perceive *word occurrences*. But we do not thereby form *beliefs* about word occurrences. We form beliefs about presentations-as-true, about content and force. The recipient does not *perceive* content and force; the recipient only perceives “the words and sentences with which” the sender presents-as-true. The content of the perceptual representation is very different from the content of the comprehension-based belief.⁸⁵ [Burge makes this point. See the first difference between perception and understanding.]
- (8) So, our perception of word occurrences in language comprehension does not contribute to an entitlement (it does not contribute a warrant) for believing that someone asserted that P. “To be perceptually [empirically] entitled to a belief about what” a sender presents-as-true, the recipient would have to perceptually represent the content and force of the presentation-as-true; the recipient would have to perceive content and force. But since the recipient does not, the perceptual representation of word occurrences does not contribute to a warrant for the belief that someone asserted that P. Perception plays a merely triggering, and not a warranting role. Hence the warrant is not empirical. [From (6), (7)]
- (9) Hence the warrant (in some cases of comprehension) is apriori. [From (4), (8)]

Malgren's reconstruction has its virtues. Burge clearly asserts (1), (2), (3), and (4). Burge also clearly asserts (7): the lack of a “match” between what we represent in perception when we

⁸³ Malmgren 2006: 204-209

⁸⁴ Malmgren 2006: 208-209.

⁸⁵ Malmgren 2006: 209.

perceive word occurrences, on the one hand, and what we represent in thought when we understand presentations-as-true, on the other. He also clearly asserts the conclusion. That goes without saying. So the argument Malmgren attributes to Burge is clearly formulated, easy to follow, valid, and one can see how it makes sense of things Burge says.

And so a strength of the interpretation is that it makes sense of the role that (7) plays in Burge's case for thinking comprehension is sometimes warranted apriori—(6) and (7) would fit hand in glove. If Burge asserts the content-matching criterion for a perceptual representation to contribute a warrant to a belief, then Burge's argument for why are sometimes warranted apriori in believing it is presented-as-true that P is pretty straightforward, easy to see. In effect, Malmgren has reverse-engineered Burge's argument by asking what general principle we would have to add to Burge's (7) to create a deductively valid argument for (8) and so (9). If Burge asserts (6), the content-matching criterion, then everything falls into place. And if (6) is false—as Malmgren will argue—we can see why Burge's argument fails to convince.

But does Burge assert (6), the *content-matching criterion*? Malmgren does point out that Burge believes that *if* a perceptual representation with a certain content supports a perceptual belief with the same content, then the perceptual representation very clearly plays a warranting role. Our perception as of x's being F warrants our perceptual belief that x is F. But does Burge actually assert that a perceptual representation with a certain content plays a warranting role for a belief *only if* the (non-propositional) perceptual representation appropriately matches the (propositional) content of the belief? In other words, does Burge really assert the criterion?

Other than rightly noting that this criterion would help Burge reach his surprising conclusion, Malmgren does not adduce any further evidence in support of attributing the criterion to Burge. She only notes that the criterion “must be true” for Burge's “strategy to work.”⁸⁶ We'll return to this issue momentarily.

Malmgren then argues the content-matching criterion can't possibly be true:

There are many clear cases of perceptually warranted belief that are not captured by [the content-matching criterion]. Consider, for instance, my coming to believe that professor X is in his office, on the basis of seeing that the lights are on, or my coming to believe that Australia won the U.S. Open, on the basis of hearing that primeval cries are coming from the local Aussie beerhouse. At least part of my warrant for believing that both X is in his office and that Australia has won the U.S. Open is perceptual. But [the content-matching criterion] is not met...The perceptual state that grounds my belief *that X is in his office* clearly has the “wrong kind of content.” By hypothesis, the belief is not based on seeing *that X is in his office*...It is based on seeing *that the lights are on*.⁸⁷

Here's the structure of the case:

- (i) S perceives as of x's being F (the lights are on). This warrants S in believing that x is F (that the lights are on).
- (ii) S has background knowledge that F's are Gs (when the lights are on in the office, that's because someone is there, probably the person assigned to the office, Professor X).

⁸⁶ Malmgren 2006: 212.

⁸⁷ Malmgren 2006: 210.

- (iii) S thereby concludes, by, inference, that x is G (Professor X is in his office).
- (iv) Surely in such a case the conclusion that x is G (Professor X is in his office) is empirically supported by S's perception as of x's being F (the lights are on).
- (v) But the content of S's perception as of x's being F (the lights are on) does not "appropriately match" the content of S's belief that x is G (Professor X is in his office).
- (vi) Hence, by the content-matching criterion, S's perception as of x's being F does not contribute empirical warrant to S's belief that x is G.
- (vii) But that is evidently absurd. Hence, the content-matching criterion is manifestly false.

Malmgren's interpretation of Burge then relies on the content-matching criterion, and though on Malmgren's interpretation Burge's reasoning is valid, it isn't sound, for the content-matching criterion isn't true. Burge's argument, on Malmgren's interpretation, cannot support its conclusion.

Though I think Malmgren's interpretation has its virtues, I do not accept Malmgren's interpretation, for I do not believe that Burge relies on the content-matching criterion. I'll give four reasons for thinking he doesn't.

Firstly, he never explicitly states the criterion. Though this point is not conclusive evidence, it's a piece of evidence.

Secondly, the counter examples Malmgren provides are pretty obvious, suggesting that it is not hard to see that the criterion must be false. Again, though this point is not conclusive (as we make mistakes), it is strongly suggestive.

Thirdly, Burge is pretty clearly aware of the cases involving linguistic understanding that parallel the kinds of cases Malmgren imagines. Burge is pretty clearly aware that perceiving an utterance can empirically warrant belief about the utterance (a perceptual belief about word occurrences), and through inference the individual could come to from a belief about the content and force of the speech act. Those are cases, as we have already seen, of interpretation. And those cases, we have already seen, Burge classifies as (almost always) empirically warranted. So as he is making his case for the possibility that perception might fail to contribute a warrant in cases of intellectual understanding (conceptual comprehension), he is evidently aware of the empirical structure of warrants in Malmgren's examples. If he held the content matching criterion, it would be mysterious why he classifies cases of interpretation as empirical. For if he had the criterion in mind, he would classify the warrant for a belief that someone asserted that P through interpretation as apriori and not as empirical, as he does. I think this is an even stronger consideration for thinking that Burge does not embrace the criterion.

Fourthly, if Burge really had the criterion in mind, and so had a deductively valid argument at his disposal, then it would be odd that he relied on supporting analogies and a thought experiment when making his case, especially analogies and thought experiments that are designed to persuade the reader to think that perception might not play a warranting role, but not in any way designed to support the content-matching principle. Why, if he had the content-matching principle in mind, did he go to so much trouble to provide other grounds for accepting his thesis?

Indeed, Malmgren seems to ignore the evidential support of the analogies and the thought experiment. When she discusses the analogy with purely preservative memory at the beginning of her essay, at best she takes it to illustrate Burge's view, not as providing support by analogy.

She does not even mention Burge’s analogy with perceiving diagrams.⁸⁸ Nor does she mention Burge’s thought experiment from ‘Interpretation and Comprehension,’ though she cites the essay. And in Burge’s thought experiment, there isn’t even a perception of word occurrences. Comprehension, instead, is “injected” directly from sender to receiver; there isn’t even something to apply the “content-matching criterion” to.⁸⁹

Instead of discussing Burge’s various considerations beyond his point about different “objects of cognitive focus” (that we *perceive* word occurrences but *understand* content and force), Malmgren reverse-engineers a criterion that would make Burge’s job easy; he’d have a deductively valid argument at his disposal, even if one of the premises turns out to be false. She even says that the content-matching criterion argument is the “only reason he gives” for holding that perception’s role in comprehension is not “epistemically significant.”⁹⁰ But in my view she is incorrect. Burge does not rely on the content-matching criterion.

Malmgren’s Counterargument

Malmgren also provides an argument against Burge’s first thesis. Every belief of the form someone asserted that P is warranted empirically:

- (1) Our warrant to believe that someone asserted that P is either derived from a more *specific* belief that a particular speaker—NN—asserted that P, or from *general* considerations.
- (2) A warrant to believe that someone asserted that P may derive from a specific belief that NN asserted that P through inference. From NN asserted that P one can infer that someone asserted that P.⁹¹
- (3) The warrant for the more specific belief that NN asserted that P is empirical. The belief that it is *NN* who asserted that P is warranted empirically, if warranted at all. This belief is a “*paradigm* case of a belief for which I can only have a posteriori warrant.”⁹²
- (4) So if the warrant to believe someone asserted that P derives from a more specific belief, then the warrant is *ipso facto* empirical, and so cannot be apriori. [From (1), (2), (3)]
- (5) Warrant from general considerations is not possible. “[It] is not even remotely plausible to suggest that there are apriori general grounds for believing that it is [asserted] that P.”⁹³

⁸⁸ In her 2013 she does mention the analogy (2013: 158-9) but does not discuss it.

⁸⁹ In her 2013 she does briefly remark on the Injection Argument. She says it is not clear “that our notion of testimonial warrant/knowledge is even applicable to agents with such radically different means of communication” (2013: 180, n. 10). This is all she says about the thought experiment; she does not elucidate. It is unclear how exactly how her semantic point (“our notion”) about testimonial knowledge (and so Burge’s second and third theses) matters to Burge’s first thesis about speech act knowledge, knowledge that someone asserted that P. Don’t the aliens know, even though they communicate differently, that someone asserted that P? Further, I disagree that our notion of testimonial knowledge does not apply to the aliens Burge imagines. That they might communicate differently than us does not show that they do not possess the full suite of speech acts that we possess, and the competence to understand the full suite. That they testify and comprehend testimony differently does not show they can never have “testimonial” warrant or knowledge.

⁹⁰ Malmgren 2006: 271, n. 40.

⁹¹ “There are of course several ways...to come by warrant to believe [someone asserted that P]—perhaps most obviously: by competent deductive inference from (warranted belief in) [a belief that NN asserted that P]” (Malmgren 2013: 164).

⁹² Malmgren 2006: 215.

⁹³ Malmgren 2006: 217.

Instead, any warrant to believe someone asserted that P “presumably...rest—in both the psychological and the epistemic sense of ‘rest’—on beliefs about [presentations-as-true] of the more specific type.⁹⁴

- (6) Hence, the warrant to believe someone asserted that P is necessarily empirical. [From (1), (4), (5)]

Is this a good argument? Must warrant to believe someone asserted that P rest on more specific beliefs that NN asserted that P? Malmgren thinks that to have warrant to believe that someone asserted that P from perceiving an utterance, one must first have warrant to believe that the particular utterer (Phillip, for example) asserted that P, and then deduce from the particular belief (that Phillip asserted that P) the existential belief that someone asserted that P or that it is asserted that P. Since knowledge of the particular interlocutor is empirical, Malmgren concludes that comprehension is always empirical.

Malmgren does not notice the “two routes” explanation of our knowledge that NN asserted that P. Burge wholeheartedly agrees that our knowledge of presentations-as-true (other than our own judgments) depends on empirical knowledge to know who presented-as-true that P. But Burge need not hold that our knowledge that it is asserted that P (or that someone asserted that P) derives from our empirical knowledge of *who* asserted that P, or *when* or *where*. Our knowledge it is asserted that P—when our understanding is entirely intellectual—is triggered by perceiving sounds and marks that, Burge argues, enables apriori knowledge. Our knowledge of *who*, *when* and *where* is empirical, grounded in perception backed *de re* cognition of the speaker, the time, and the location. Combined we come to know that NN asserted that P (at a particular time and place). We don’t have to derive our knowledge that someone asserted that P from empirical knowledge that it was NN who asserted that P, for we already know apriori, or so Burge has argued, that it is asserted that P, and so that someone asserted that P. So Malmgren’s counterargument misses Burge’s position: we neither come to our knowledge that it is asserted that P from more a more specific belief that NN asserted that P or from general considerations.⁹⁵

I conclude that Malmgren’s criticisms fail to undermine Burge’s position. If Burge is mistaken, Malmgren’s counter-considerations do not show why.

⁹⁴ Malmgren 2006: 216.

⁹⁵ Why is it OK for the recipient to transition from the belief that someone asserted that P to the belief that P, without first identifying the particular speaker? Good question. The answer has to do with the role of the Acceptance Principle. The Acceptance Principle is fully general. It covers all (seeming) presentations-as-true, regardless of the particular speaker. So the prima facie warrant applies generally across all speakers. Hence it applies even if the recipient does not identify the particular speaker. Hence its force in the particular case does not require knowledge or awareness that it was so-and-so that asserted that P. Warrant through comprehension for the belief that someone asserted that P is then enough for the Acceptance Principle to apply to the particular acceptance. In the ordinary case the recipient will know who the sender is, but since the Acceptance Principle is not sender relative, that knowledge does not contribute to the force of the warrant. It is, so to speak, epiphenomenal.

On the other hand, knowledge of the particular speaker is often required to connect supplemental warrants for acceptance in the recipient’s background body of knowledge. Knowledge of the particular speaker also provides a fertile source for defeaters. But knowledge of the particular speaker is not necessary for our general competence with interlocution to generate prima facie defeasible warrant for acceptance in the particular case.

7. Why did Burge Change his Mind?

By 2011 Burge gave up on his surprising claims about testimony and the scope of the apriori:

I now believe these claims...were mistaken. I believe that human beings do not have a non-empirical warrant for their comprehension of what others say.⁹⁶

The entitlement to rely on particular exercises of a capacity for comprehension is empirical.⁹⁷

Our overall default warrant for belief based on interlocution is empirical, but *barely empirical*.⁹⁸

What led him to change his mind?

After publishing his essays on interlocution in the 1990s (from 1993 to 1999), Burge published a number of papers on perception and perceptual warrant, especially his paper ‘Perceptual Entitlement’ (2003) and his book *Origins of Objectivity* (2010). I think a handful of interrelated ideas became clearer to Burge as a result.

Comprehension Competence involves Perceptual Competence

The first idea is that warrant arises from, or supervenes on, (exercises of) good, reliable routes to truth. The second is that good routes to truth involve *various kinds of elements* when exercised. The third is that perceptual representations as elements suffice for empirical warrant. The fourth is that perceiving utterances is, for us, an ineliminable part of our competence to comprehend presentations-as-true. When *we* competently understand utterances, we transition from low-level perceptual representations of shapes and sounds to high-level perceptual representation of phonemes and words to linguistic representations of syntax and semantics; we transition from one reliable system to a second and then to a third. The upshot is that even though language perception and comprehension is very different from ordinary perception, the warrant is still empirical for all that, even in the carefully circumscribed cases of intellectual understanding that it is presented-as-true that P, hence someone asserted that P.

A good route to truth is a reliable cognitive competence, a competence to form reliably true beliefs. Good routes to truth are reliable in normal conditions. A normally functioning exercise of a reliable competence normally promotes truth and knowledge in normal conditions. Warrant arises through exercises of good routes to truth.

Exercises of these competences involve various kinds of *elements*.

This talk of “elements” is probably easy to grasp when we think of reasoning. When we reason deductively from premise beliefs according to a competence with an inference rule, the premises are *elements* in our reasoning, elements in the exercise of a good route to truth.

“Elements” talk applies to perception too, and every other cognitive competence. When we rely on vision, for example, there are a number of psychological stages (many sub-personal) that lead to the formation of a visual perceptual representation (a state of the whole individual). Those stages involve processing psychological and pre-psychological elements (sensations,

⁹⁶ Burge 2013b: 31

⁹⁷ Burge 2011b: 367

⁹⁸ Burge 2013b: 31. Emphasis in original.

registrations, early representations) that lead to perceptual representations (states of the whole individual). If we then transition a stage further from perceptual representation to perceptual belief, the perceptual representation is an *element* in the route to perceptual belief. Sensations, perceptions, etc., are all elements in the formation of perceptual beliefs; they are elements in exercises of good routes to truth.

Burge then connects this talk to classifying warrants. Warrant is empirical if the good route to truth—if the normally functioning, reliable competence—involves a sense-perceptual element. Otherwise the warrant is non-empirical. The presence of sense-perceptual representations in the route to truth—in the exercise of the cognitive competence, in the flowchart describing the normal functioning of the good route to truth—is then sufficient for empirical warrant.

Next, Burge came to appreciate that his reasons supporting his surprising claims made no difference in the end. Because, *for us at least, our* competence to comprehend presentations-as-true—our competence to reliably comprehend what others present-as-true—makes non-eliminable use of reliable sense-perceptual abilities and perceptual representations of utterances, of acoustical signals or perceptible marks, and high-level representations in distinctively language perception. That’s how our reliable competence to comprehend works. “The role of perception in comprehension is crucial. In humans, it is ineliminable.”⁹⁹

Our competence of coming to know what another mind asserted involves perceiving their utterance. Humans link one mind to another through perception. That’s how we do it, competently and reliably so, with warrant, often knowledgeably.

Sense-perceptions are then always involved when we exercise our reliable competence to comprehend presentations-as-true, even in cases of intellectual understanding. The warrant for us for every case of intellectual understanding is then empirical.

[The warrant is always empirical] because comprehension must rely on the specifics of sense perception. Comprehension of specific content and mode is by way of a capacity to discriminate certain events perceptually and to systematically associate certain types of perception with comprehension of certain contents and modes. That is what the competence consists in...[Epistemic] warrant for relying on the comprehension depends on meeting standards for the well-functioning and reliability of the perception, and for transitioning from the perception to the comprehension. So the warrant is empirical.

But what about all of Burge’s talk about how we *perceive* utterances—sounds and marks—but we *understand* content and force? All of that talk, Burge now sees, though still entirely true, makes no difference. At best, Burge now thinks, it makes our warrant *barely* empirical. But it still empirical for all that.

Why is that? First we perceptually represent sounds or marks. We then perceptually represent phonemes, words. That in turn triggers comprehension. We then comprehend content and force. But the perceptual representations at the first two steps before comprehension are part of our competence to comprehend, for reliability of perceptual representations as of sounds or marks and the higher-level representations of phonemes and words contribute to the reliability of our competence to comprehend presentations-as-true, and so to its warranting force. Reliable perceptual competence in perceptually representing sounds or marks and phonemes and words is a part of our good route to understanding content and force

⁹⁹ Burge 2013b: 31.

[In exercising] good routes to veridical comprehension, one must rely on perception. Perceiving well is a constitutive part of comprehending another's utterance... But since the perception itself is constituted primarily by a cognitive super-structure, perception seems to play the role of triggering the recipient's use of this cognitive super-structure and enabling it to align with the cognitive super-structure of the interlocutor. The empirical element in language perception functions primarily as a connector between two cognitive systems and systems of understanding.¹⁰⁰

[R]egardless of how heavily informed language perception is by higher-level cognitive competencies, [perception's] operating well...and providing a base for sub-personal transitions that lead to comprehension, are also *part of* having a good, reliable route to comprehension of others' propositional presentations-as-true...Good use of perception is part of good exercise of comprehension of others' utterances...¹⁰¹

What is comprehended is not what is perceived. In language perception, perceiving is very nearly merely causally triggered conceiving. Still, it is perceiving. Comprehension involving making good transitions from perception of physical events. Perception's going reliably well, in normal circumstances, contributes to the positive force of warrants for relying on occurrent exercises of conceptual comprehension...Knowledge that relies on warrant for comprehension—including knowledge that relies essentially on the default *prima facie* warrant to believe what other says in particular cases—is always empirical, even if sometimes just barely.¹⁰²

Burge's distinctions, analogies, and so on, no longer suffice. At best they show that the warrant for understanding is *barely* empirical, not that it is not empirical at all.

But what about Burge's two analogies and his thought experiment? What does Burge think of their force now?

The Injection Argument

As for his thought experiment, he no longer sees the possibility of creatures that comprehend without perception as relevant. Sure, there are (possible) creatures that communicate through something other than perception (a form of extra-sensory communication)—there are creatures that connect minds without perception of an intervening act—but that only shows there are *different* competencies that *other* beings might deploy to understand one another. It does not show that *our* psychological competencies are just like *their* competencies *in every respect*. *Our* competence involves perception, even if *their* competence does not. Our competence warrants empirically, even if their competence warrants apriori. Burge's first thesis might be true for them, just not true for us. Compare the possibility of knowledge of particular events in the world without relying on sense perception. Angels or God might have this kind of knowledge. Even so, we don't.

¹⁰⁰ Burge 2011b: 372-3

¹⁰¹ Burge 2011a: 284.

¹⁰² Burge 2011a: 284.

But our actual comprehension competencies do not work [through extra-sensory comprehension]... Since our psychological competencies do employ perception...the role of perception in successful exercises of comprehension cannot be avoided *just because* other, psychologically possible beings might not use perception in comprehension...[T]he Injection Argument, though instructive, cannot show that we have apriori warrant to rely on comprehension of others' utterances...The argument shows at most that it is in principle possible for someone to have such an apriori warrant.¹⁰³

Perceiving Diagrams

What about Burge's two analogies? What does he think now about the first analogy? Since he is now clear that perceptual competence is an essential part of our competence to comprehend presentations-as-true, he is now clear that reliable perceptual representations are essential to reliably comprehending presentations-as-true, and so clear that reliable perception is essential to warranted comprehension. But this isn't essential when we perceive proofs and diagrams when doing mathematics. When doing math, the warrant resides in the understanding of the proofs and truths, not in the reliability of our perceiving diagrams.

[To] gain knowledge by relying on communication, one must get right something about what is being communicated. By contrast, in the mathematics case, knowledge does not depend on getting right what proposition is uttered, or what diagram is drawn, by the interlocutor. The warrant attaches to one's understanding of whatever proposition is evoked by the external utterance. The proposition need not have any relation at all to what the interlocutor is trying to communicate. In fact, the triggering events need not have any mathematical relevance at all. There need be no reliable understanding of any event outside of one's psychology. The warrant for understanding/believing logical and mathematical truths attaches to the individual understander's understanding of the content of his/her own states.¹⁰⁴

The fact that unreliable perception sometimes helps trigger reliable understanding in the case of mathematics doesn't show that reliable perception of utterances isn't required for reliable comprehension of those very same utterances. And if it is reliable perception that's a part of the good route to truth, then there is no getting around the warranting role of reliable sense-perceptual elements in the route to truth.

Purely Preservative Memory

What about Burge's second analogy? Though he thinks it is still clearly true that purely preservative memory in deductive reasoning does not contribute a warrant for the conclusion but only preserves warranting force from the premises, he notes an important difference. In memory within an individual, contents (propositional attitudes) are preserved. No new material gets added. But in interlocution, the recipient perceives and represents a presentation-as-true. Interlocution involves the exercise of a further cognitive competence—language understanding—that links two minds together. This introduces new subject matter into the process—the recipient's understanding that *it is asserted that P*. Interlocution then has a “substantive” element involved—the representation as of a presentation-as-true—that has no

¹⁰³ Burge 2011a: 282.

¹⁰⁴ Burge 2011a: 283.

analogue in purely preservative memory. And since Burge now sees our warrant for understanding—even intellectual understanding—as always empirical, there is always an empirical element in our understanding and acceptance of the word of others.¹⁰⁵

* * * * *

This has been a long paper. If everything went according to plan, you should now know:

- Burge’s view of apriori warrant
- The sub-category of language understanding Burge calls *intellectual understanding*
- Burge’s exact claims about the scope of apriori warrants through testimony
- Burge’s considerations for his surprising claims
- Why Burge eventually abandoned his thesis
- Why Malmgren missed her mark

I had the good fortune to present the main ideas to a number of philosophers. There were two reactions I sometimes received that I didn’t expect. The first was sheer indifference to Burge’s considerations—this reaction thought nothing Burge might say could lend any initial credibility to his surprising claims. Those with this reaction often even saw no point to his retraction, grounded in his account of perceptual warrant. The second reaction I didn’t expect was complete acceptance of Burge’s considerations—this reaction thought Burge’s grounds for his retraction were not compelling, and that we should stand with Burge’s surprising claims, not against them. Though these were not the only reactions I received, they both stood out. I wonder what your reaction might be.

¹⁰⁵ Burge 2011a: 282

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